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ABSTRACT

Teachers of literature do not merely guide students; they also serve as critics. Teachers should remember that their classroom role as literary critics is to serve the needs of students who may not become future scholars of literature. Consequently, in deciphering the complexities of literature, teachers must focus on what the students need in order to learn to read more perceptively and analytically. The teacher must try to help a student develop three basic understandings of a piece of literature: an understanding of the approaches to determining meaning; an understanding of genres or forms and their characteristics; and an understanding of the limitations of interpretation and evaluation. Rather than restricting themselves to the particular approaches which they prefer when analyzing literature for their own publications, teachers should guide students to an awareness of various approaches which may include literal, historical, and cultural interpretations, stressing several different analytical approaches. (RB)

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LITERARY CRITICISM: THE TEACHER AS SERVANT TO THE STUDENT

by

Darwin T. Turner

Teachers of literature do not merely guide students; they serve also as critics. Performing poorly in this role, they may damage ~~the~~ students seriously, for teacher-critics can delude a captive, inexperienced audience into believing literature to be a Sphinx-phrased riddle, a Cretan monstrosity, or anything other than what it is.

In our present time, many teachers in grades 9 through 14 are baffled by the task of serving as critics for ~~the~~ students. They see literary criticism itself as a carnival of confusion. In garishly lighted stalls, hucksters hawk their wares--some old, some new: Neo-Aristotleanism, historical criticism, Marxism, myths, archetypes, symbols. (I need not recite for you the labels on all the nostrums). Outside the carnival are the pickets--students, non-students, former students--all insisting that each reader has a democratic right to understand or value a literary work as the reader wishes.

Such confusion inevitably affects teachers. Some run to the nearest or loudest huckster and cower there, refusing to see anything but the goods in that one stall. Others, motivated by the ~~faces~~ pickets outside the carnival, renounce everything. A few even set up their own booths. None of these actions, however, resolves the confusion or harmonizes the ~~babel~~ babble.

I have not come here to establish another booth. Instead, I merely wish to suggest a perspective for teachers. The perspective is not new; it may even seem elementary to you in this audience who have studied literature under America's most renowned academic critics and who have taught literature in high school and colleges.

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Nevertheless, a re-examination of the perspective may be a valuable approach to resolving the confusion; but, even if it cannot totally accomplish this purpose, it at least has value as a part of the ritual of reaffirmation and rededication.

Simply stated, teachers should remember that their classroom role as literary critics is to serve the needs of students, who may not become future scholars of literature. I am not considering the functions and responsibilities of teachers when they publish articles in professional journals or when they lecture to other educators. In those instances, they assume different roles and for different audiences. Within the classroom, however, the teacher functions as the servant of students. Consequently, rather than concentrating on ways to demonstrate their own ingenuity in deciphering the complexities of literature, teachers must focus on what the students need in order to learn to read more perceptively and analytically. Let us, therefore, consider briefly what a teacher-critic can do for a student.

Needless to say, a teacher exercises a very important act of literary criticism in the process of selecting the literary materials for the course. Today, however, I want to talk only about what happens after the books have been selected.

First, of course, before any criticism can begin, students must learn that they need to read literary works carefully. I do not need to elaborate on this concept. In this generation, at least, teachers know that--regardless of the value of the study of an author's life or the study of critical analyses of the work (and such examinations do have value)--the work itself is the primary object of study. The student must read the work carefully and completely in such a way as to be able to describe it and identify segments which impress or which cause difficulty.

After this fundamental has been achieved, a teacher must try to help a student develop three basic understandings: 1) an understanding of the approaches to determining meaning; 2) an understanding of genres or forms and their unique characteristics; 3) an understanding of the limitations of interpretation and evaluation.

First, a student must be guided to understand the procedures which teachers and critics use in their efforts to determine meaning. One must assume, of course, that writers do intend meanings which can be discerned by others. Rather than restricting themselves to the particular approaches which they prefer when analyzing literature for their own publication, teachers should guide students to awareness of various approaches. Of these, I suggest that the first be the literal: What meaning can be understood if the work is considered literally and is approached through an analysis of words, allusions, and syntax?

A second approach may be called the historical: What further or different insights result from a knowledge of the author's attitudes and ideas as far as those can be determined from information about his life and about his habits in other works? What further or different insights result from a knowledge of the attitudes and ideas characteristic of the culture within which the author lived?

A third approach may be called--arbitrarily--the cultural: Do further insights result from a reader's knowledge of the symbols, myths, archetypes, and rhetorical devices used by the author's contemporaries?

Although I have arranged these three sequentially, I do not wish to imply that the second is necessarily superior to the first and the third to the second. Instead, I am merely stating that different approaches may produce different understandings about a work and that a teacher, therefore, must provide a student with

several keys for interpreting a work.

Let me illustrate this concept by using Zora Neale Hurston's Moses, Man of the Mountain. Read literally, this novel seems to be an historical romance about Moses and the "Chosen People." A modified or different meaning can emerge, however, if one knows that black people of Hurston's time often described themselves in the terms Hurston uses for the chosen people and that an analogy exists between the attitudes of Hurston's Egyptians towards their slaves and the Southern white people's attitudes towards blacks in America. Still additional meaning results, however, from awareness that John Erskine, a contemporary of Zora Neale Hurston, had earned popularity by writing satires about historical or legendary figures.

Each of these meanings considers in part a deliberate intention of the writer. Each is finite in that sense. A teacher, however, must also guide a student to perceive that works may ~~also~~ have nonfinite meanings. (I prefer this term to the more familiar but misleading term "universal.") That is, Shakespeare may have merely intended his drama Hamlet to be the story of a Danish prince who loses his life in the process of exacting vengeance for the murder of his father. For a twentieth-century black student, however, the drama may have greater significance as a suggestion of the difficulties experienced by an individual living in a society controlled by his enemy. What would an actual black Hamlet do if a Southern sheriff killed his father and took his mother as mistress? To say that this latter is Shakespeare's meaning is false. To say even that it is the meaning, regardless of Shakespeare's intention, is false. Such a meaning, however, may be the most important for a student because of its relevance to the student's experience.

Despite its value, I have deliberately placed this interpretation last in

the chain. Because I am a teacher of literature, I must insist that students attempt to read and understand the author's work before they recreate the work as their own.

If I seem to stress meaning, I am merely evidencing my belief that most students , who do not intend to become literary scholars, are justifiably concerned primarily with the meaning of works. Teacher-critics, however, have the additional responsibility of guiding students to recognize literary works as art forms. Prerequisite to such recognition are a knowledge of traditional genres and forms and an understanding of the elements which are common to all and those which are unique in each.

For instance, words, metaphors, symbols, sentences are common to all literary works. Is a sentence in a poem, however, identical with a sentence in an essay? Does one expect in a poem a particular kind of sentence not customarily found in an essay? How is a poetic stanza similar to or different from a prose paragraph? Does the difference lie merely in the use of capital letters at the beginnings of lines? Does the use of rhyme at the ends of lines turn prose into poetry? Does the decision to write a poem impose certain restraints upon the writer's sentence structure? How is the action or the revelation of character in a drama necessarily different from similar elements in a novel? How is the dramatist's structure of a scene affected by the presence or absence of a curtain which can be drawn across the stage?

To some people such questions may seem removed from the concept of art as beauty. But such questions force students to examine the artist's skill in craft or design. Such questions focus a student upon an artist's choices and decisions. They give insight into the working of the minds of artists and lead eventually to awareness of the process of creating art. Students who have followed the process

of composition may have far greater appreciation of the beauty of an art product than can ever be attained by other students who can merely stammer, "Well, this poem is artistic because --uh – it's so pretty, and –uh –well, you know, I like it."

Finally, I believe that teachers must assist students to understand the limitations of both interpretation and evaluation. Well-prepared teachers need not feel that they must abandon all right to believe and suggest that their interpretations are superior to those of students. In normal circumstances, the interpretations should be superior--not because teachers are older and wiser (and the givers of grades) but because teachers have--or should have--~~the~~ experience and breadth in reading, knowledge of an author's life and work, and familiarity with the culture of the author's age: all these should provide a teacher with a shopful of tools to use either in ascertaining a probable or plausible interpretation or in rejecting an implausible ~~interpretation.~~ On the other hand, a teacher must admit the inevitable limitation--which students suspect even before the teacher's admission: at best, interpretation is merely a conclusion reasoned as effectively as possible from the best available evidence. An interpretation is not a fact, whether it is spoken by a teacher or is printed in the vivid black type and bound within hard cloth covers.

Furthermore, as I suggested in my comments about Hurston's Moses, Man of the Mountain, different interpretations need not be mutually exclusive. Nor is an ingenious interpretation necessarily the most useful. My ability to interpret the story "Little Red Riding Hood" as a female parallel to Pilgrim's Progress does not necessarily offer readers the most value. Common sense argues that a careless Melville character should be able to fall down without experiencing rebirth upon his rising. Common sense must provide some restrictions--common sense and the

awareness that writers, teachers, and critics are human beings who may err. Alexander Pope not withstanding, Homer may nod, Shakespeare may snooze, and T.S. Eliot may snore.

As interpretation has limitations because it is not a science which can validate all of its Truths, so evaluation has limits, which cause me to argue for highly permissive evaluation--at least within classrooms. Consider possible pitfalls in evaluation. Is a novelist to be castigated because his characters are not credible? Who can determine true credibility? For example, if a black author creates a black character who reacts psychotically against racial oppression, what will be the estimate of the character's credibility if the work is read by whites who believe that blacks never react psychotically to oppression. For that matter, who determines that the character's behavior can be identified as psychotic? If a black author delineates a character who does not react psychotically, how can a reader determine whether the character is artistically credible or is merely evidence of the black writer's nonartistic reproduction of a stereotype expected by white readers? If you believe that I am asking foolish questions, recall the furor which resulted when William Styron meditated Nat Turner into a sexually frustrated leader who, believing that he would be degraded by relationships with black women, dreams of raping whites. White critics praised Styron for a credible and perceptive revelation of Nat's psychology, while black critics argued to deaf ears that Styron's Nat represented a white author's projection of racist white America's stereotypic image of a black leader.

Evaluations of thought or style can present similar pitfalls. Can a teacher validly pass judgment on the rhythm of a poet without knowing all the rhythms which may exist in the poet's world? Can a teacher insist that the form of a work is

unsuitable merely because the judges of the teacher's era prefer a different form--a Jamesian novel, for instance, rather than whatever one chooses to call Moby Dick? Can a teacher argue that an author's philosophy or thought is shallow because, in the fifty years since the work was published, society has revolved into a different philosophical view?

Time does not permit my continuing to list the kinds of questions which persuade me to be cautious in guiding students towards evaluation. Perhaps the ultimate safety valve is a teacher's emphasis, not only that evaluation is often a matter of taste, but also that it is, at the best, a subjective judgment. For, no matter how much we may honor the ideals of those who, like Matthew Arnold, have urged dispassionate--or even disinterested--appraisals of literature, teachers are guided by subjective predilections and prejudices. The sooner we recognize and admit our own biases, the sooner we will begin to establish credibility with students and the more effective we will be in assisting them to develop their own understandings--and biases.

As I warned you in advance, I have said nothing new. I have merely affirmed an old but sometimes forgotten idea: the function of a teacher is to help students develop their abilities. Focus on this goal, I believe, will motivate a teacher (1) to help a student comprehend diverse approaches to interpreting the meaning of literary works; (2) to assist a student to develop insight into literary works as art forms and awareness of the process of artistic composition; and (3) to educate a student to discern the limitations of interpretation and evaluation. The classroom teacher who can guide a student in these ways is the literary critic a student needs.